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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000121

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: IS THE BURMESE REGIME COMING UNGLUED?

REF: A. RANGOON 105

[1](#)B. RANGOON 104 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: At the end of a week of wild rumors and speculation involving the fate of the SPDC's top three leaders, there are no signs of unusual activity and by all appearances the Burmese regime is conducting business as usual. We don't rule out that something could be amiss. Former PM Khin Nyunt and his military intelligence apparatus were the regime's primary enforcers of maximum control; his ouster and the subsequent purge of MI have clearly hampered the SPDC's ability to run a tight ship. However, the regime's historical opaqueness, secrecy, and censorship (fueled by exile radio broadcasts that carry the latest rumors) are the primary sources of ongoing speculation that the SPDC is on the verge of imploding. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Rangoon is, during even normal times, a city of swirling rumors and wild speculation. The opacity of the regime's decision making, rare public forays and pronouncements by the SPDC's top generals, and extreme censorship all combine to create a void of factual information perhaps like no other country in the region. The result is incessant, and highly inconsistent, guesswork among local observers and Burmese citizens on the latest machinations of the secretive regime, often fueled by international radio services (especially the Democratic Voice of Burma and Radio Free Asia) that frequently broadcast unconfirmed street rumors.

[1](#)3. (SBU) This past week has been no exception. Kicked off on January 21 by the mysterious "on duty" death of SPDC Vice Chairman Maung Aye's personal assistant (ref A), the days that followed buzzed with varying reports of a senior-level shakeup, each rumor more incredulous than the next that one, two, or all three top SPDC leaders (Than Shwe, Maung Aye, and Soe Win) had either been arrested, assassinated, or incapacitated from strokes or heart attacks.

[1](#)4. (C) Our assessment of January 25 (ref A) holds true as of COB January 28: there are no signs of unusual activity in Rangoon and by all accounts the regime is carrying on with business as usual. On January 27, the chief of the Ministry of Defense's Foreign Liaison Office (FLO) read a prepared statement to a scheduled monthly gathering of the Defense Attache corps. In an unusual move, the GOB acknowledged recent rumors and speculation about senior-level leaders, but declared that nothing extraordinary had occurred. The FLO chief confirmed that Maung Aye's assistant, Col. Bo Win Tun, had committed suicide and made an appeal to "let the man rest in peace."

[1](#)5. (SBU) It is true, as foreign media sources have observed, that the top three SPDC leaders have made no public appearances in recent days (in itself, not an unusual posture for the Chairman and Vice Chairman). However, there are numerous signs that would indicate the regime is conducting business as usual, including:

--Senior Burmese officials attended official functions this week hosted by the Thai, Indian, and Australian missions (and attended by Emboffs), including SPDC member Lt-Gen Maung Bo as well as Foreign Minister Nyan Win;

--Numerous SPDC members--including S-1 Lt-Gen Thein Sein, Lt-Gen Kyaw Win, Lt-Gen Ye Myint, and Lt-Gen Tin Aye--have been active all week on the ribbon cutting and inspection circuit in Rangoon and at upcountry sites;

--The state-run New Light of Myanmar has, per standard practice, published throughout the week all routine correspondence between Senior General Than Shwe and Vice Senior General Maung Aye and their foreign counterparts;

--The GOB and the Thai Embassy are continuing plans for a February 1 visit by Royal Thai Supreme Commander General Chaisit Shinawatra, and the Thai anticipate meetings with Than Shwe and Maung Aye.

--GOB preparations remain underway for the National Convention (reconvening on February 17), Union Day (February 12), and Armed Forces Day (March 27).

--New military intelligence czar Myint Swe met with ethnic Kachin leaders on January 22 and S-1 met with the same group on January 23. (Emboffs met with one of the Kachin leaders on January 28, who reported that their encounters with the SPDC officials were "entirely routine.")

--Senior GOB officials are collaborating this week with ILO representatives to coordinate a late February high-profile visit of an independent ILO delegation (which will include a former Swiss and a former Australian head of state).

Comment: The Crazy Glue Has Evaporated

16. (C) We don't rule out that something could be amiss among the military regime's top leaders. The October ouster of former Prime Minister and MI chief Khin Nyunt, and the purge of his intelligence and business empire, has created a significant void within the regime. As noted ref B, this has led to considerable paralysis with regard to decision-making and interaction with the international community.

17. (C) Furthermore, and perhaps more significant, the demise of Khin Nyunt and MI, chief enforcers of SPDC control, has also severely hampered the regime's ability to maintain its vast network of spies and surveillance. The previously omnipotent military intelligence apparatus was not only the mechanism that stifled dissent and opposition, but was also the eyes and ears that allowed senior SPDC leaders to make many key administrative decisions for the regime--and to keep full tabs on each other. End Comment.  
Martinez